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Redeveloping Sulukule

¶11. (U) The Fatih municipality of Istanbul is demolishing substandard homes in the predominantly ethnic Roma area of Sulukule to renovate the district before 2010, when Istanbul is slated to become the "Cultural Capital of Europe". A total of 541 homes adjacent to the ancient Byzantine city wall will be destroyed to make way for 503 faux Ottoman townhouses. This renovation will displace about 3,000 people whose roots in Sulukule, according to academics, predate the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul in 1453. Despite opposition to the project from some human rights groups and international media, the municipality has already destroyed around fifty homes. The municipality also instructed all residents to abandon their homes by mid-June.

Roma Accuse the Municipality of Discrimination

¶12. (SBU) Sukru Panduk, President of the Sulukule Romani Culture Solidarity and Development Association, says the Fatih municipality's neighborhood renewal is the last stage of a long-term plan to drive Roma out of Sulukule. Panduk told us that current and past governments have discriminated and harassed his community. He claimed that the municipality closed Sulukule entertainment venues in 1992 under the pretense of unpaid taxes, thus depriving residents of their primary source of employment and income. Sixteen years of limited employment opportunities have taken a toll on the community, driving Sulukule to impoverishment and dilapidation. Panduk added that the final phase of the municipality's plan is eviction of the Roma.

¶13. (SBU) Panduk supports the development of Sulukule for the benefit of current residents, but he criticized the municipality for using economic development and urban renewal as a tool for the displacement of Roma. Despite some Roma holding Ottoman era land deeds, the municipality under Act 5366 expropriated their land at a fraction of its market value. The 2005 act gave local government greater powers to redevelop shoddy housing. Panduk accused Fatih Mayor Mustafa Demir of selling land in Sulukule to fellow Justice and Development Party (AKP) investors, who then resold the land for a considerable profit. Local Istanbul mayors, including Fatih Mayor Demir, say Act 5366, the "Renovation and

"Utilization of Deteriorated Cultural Properties Act," is a tool designed to return land management to cities. The gecekondu problem in Istanbul is legendary and replacing "gecekondu"--literally houses built overnight--is necessary to attack building code violations as well as to recover government property expropriated by squatters (reftel). Panduk, however, stated that this "renovation" comes at the expense of the poor who live in gecekondu. Even those who own property in these communities are harmed. Act 5366 requires fair compensation to owners of expropriated lands, however the committee responsible for accessing the true value typically provides an estimate less than the fair market value, according to Panduk.

¶4. (SBU) The Fatih municipality intends to relocate residents of Sulukule over 40 kilometers away to government housing in Tasoluk. According to Panduk, this would take Roma away from the primary source of income, nightclubs around Beyoglu. Furthermore, most Roma families will find even the subsidized rates of the 280 to 450 YTL monthly rents at the public housing project in Tasoluk prohibitive. Sulukule residents currently pay about 150 YTL per month and higher rents may force them to live on the streets. Panduk told us that as of April 4 no Roma have yet relocated to Tasoluk despite home demolition, choosing instead to live with friends or relatives in Sulukule.

Fatih Mayor: "All Gecekondu Must Go"

¶5. (U) Fatih Mayor Demir said the city needs to create safe housing that meets earthquake and other standards. At a February meeting of the Urban Land Institute in Istanbul (ULI), Demir showed a video to contrast overcrowded and aged Sulukule housing, with architectural drawings of faux Ottoman townhomes designed to replace existing homes. As compared

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to existing structures in Sulukule, the new buildings will have modern utilities and be built to international earthquake standards. The residents of Sulukule were offered modern low cost public housing without going through the lottery process; the typical procedure for government subsidized housing. Without mentioning the Roma by name, Demir stressed that this project would improve the lives of those living in these deprived conditions.

Destroying the Cultural Heritage of Sulukule

¶6. (U) Demir, and the other local mayors who spoke at the ULI conference maintained that legislation such as Act 5366 is critical to tackling gecekondu proliferation. These unplanned substandard buildings posed a safety risk and make coordinated urban planning nearly impossible. Also Act 5366 calls for the restoration of cultural properties, which Demir emphasized that Fatih municipality took great pains to identify and then preserve. Academic and media skeptics in the audience questioned the plan's commitment to preserving the historical aspects of Fatih. One academic stated that building modern townhouses adjacent to the ancient city walls fails to maintain the historical heritage of Sulukule. Demir disagreed, stated that the municipality worked with the architects to preserve the area's character.

¶7. (SBU) Panduk also criticized to us the municipality's efforts towards cultural preservation. Panduk showed us a modern public swimming pool complex only meters away from the old city walls, a Fatih municipality redevelopment project. In addition to the stark architectural contrast with the Byzantine walls, Panduk criticized the project's lack of connection to the community since most Roma do not swim, preferring to dance and sing. As evidence of the Mayor's lack of commitment to preservation, Panduk also showed us a

deteriorating Ottoman house that the municipality listed as a cultural preservation site. Finally Panduk stated that expelling the Roma with its deep roots in the area, would be the greatest cultural loss to Sulukule.

International Criticism

¶ 8. (U) The plan to evict Roma from their millennium-old neighborhood has garnered mostly negative local and international press attention. Stories mention Sulukule as a venue for Turkish music and belly dancing and scenes from 007's "From Russia with Love" were filmed in Sulukule. An Italian website offers visitors a chance to sign a petition calling for protection of "the oldest Roma community in the world." UNESCO, according to press reports has designated the area a World Heritage Site. For his part, Panduk hopes international criticism places Istanbul's designation as 2010 Cultural Capital of Europe in jeopardy if the municipality continues its plan to "destroy the cultural heritage of Istanbul." Prime Minister Erdogan vehemently disagreed with the critics of this project, saying those who wish to preserve Sulukule have never visited the "ugly" site.

Comment

¶ 9. (SBU) Istanbul's Roma minority was likely able to stay in Sulukule for centuries since this location was literally the edge of the city wall. However a rapidly growing population and increased land competition with attendant hikes in real estate prices have turned Sulukule into prime real estate with profits to be made in upscale Sulukule housing. Sulukule, like many other older, low-income Istanbul neighborhoods is a squalid area that could benefit from urban renewal, yet the municipality appears to be taking advantage of this situation to evict a longstanding Roma population including some landowners with clear title to their property. The GOT has made some efforts to provide for the relocation of the Roma, yet Panduk raised valid concerns regarding families' ability to afford public housing as well as the lack of traditional employment opportunities in the remote location. This episode demonstrates the enhanced powers that municipalities now have to create "urban renewal". While local governments do need to eliminate the vast problem of "gecekondus" that have proliferated over the county, Act 5366 provides officials with a powerful tool to reshape their

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jurisdictions that could potentially be targeted against political opponents as well as ethnic minorities. The apparent ease with which the Fatih municipality is evicting the Sulukule Roma may encourage other mayors to gentrify rundown neighborhoods that process "undesirable" residents.

¶ 10. (SBU) Although nearly all of the existing homes in Sulukule are shoddy 20th century structures with no historical or architectural value, academics have complained the proposed re-development fails to live up to the area's rich cultural legacy. The artist's drawings for the planned development look like a modern suburban community, completely without reference to the neighboring historic areas including Istanbul's Byzantine-era city walls. The newly built swimming pool complex also appears to be at odds with the municipality's stated goal that the redevelopment of the district will reflect the historic and cultural assets of the ancient city. Although destroying most of the structures in Sulukule would not be a great loss; removing a community who has ties to the land for centuries would be an irrevocable cultural calamity. Despite media attention to this issue, there is apparently no strong international pressure to abandon this project and at this stage, additional influence

would unlikely reverse the decision to evict the Roma.

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